Creole Houses

As early as the 1780s, the Spanish maps show "big" houses on Cane River. Raised West Indian style houses are neatly shown, carefully denoting one or two chimneys - like a product of Spanish taxation.

Carol Wells's thesis (1973) has carefully discussed the evolution of colonial houses in Natchitoches, noting post-in-the-ground (poteau en terre) construction as the earliest and then post-on-sills, bousillage-filled, half-timbered construction.

The Creole architectural history still stands on Isle Brevelle and on the point above Bayou Brevelle where Marie Thérèze Coin-Coin's property map shows her house. A raised cottage, sur selles, sits exactly there where P. Maes mapped it in 1794. As one moves south along the river, there are other structures that mark the historical development of Creole architecture in Louisiana – one of them, the Badin-Roque house being the only post-in-the-ground house remaining in Louisiana.

Creoles continue to live in some of these older houses. Dr. Tony Rachal has restored his ancestral home (Figure 22). Henry Earl Metoyer, a resident of Chicago, now owns Marie Thérèze Coin-Coin's house and hopes he can preserve it. Patrick Jones and his family have successfully renovated and are living in the Lewis Jones house (Figure 23). A non-Creole has maintained the Carroll Jones house (Roubieu Plantation), a two-story West Indian cottage, and the

Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches now owns the unique architectural complex at Melrose Plantation. Other, less well known, Creole structures are in the community, and although many have been lost, these buildings serve as constant reminders of the past - visible remnants of that heritage.

People talk about them, worry about them. The Aubin-Roque House, supposedly built by an ex-slave, Pacale, and moved to Natchitoches in the 1970s by a local politicianbusinessman turned tourism promoter, stirred deep emotions. When, later, the bousillage kitchen from Badin-Roque followed - moved by a professor turned entrepreneurial tourism developer, the community responded by starting its own preservation group, the St. Augustine Historical Society. In 1996, the professor deeded the kitchen back to the St. Augustine Historical Society, and it was moved back to Badin-Roque. The badly "restored" Roque House remains in Natchitoches - a daily reminder to the Creole population of non-Creole exploitation of their traditional resources. In spite of Creole efforts to accommodate their present and their past, preservationists' efforts remind them of their losses. Mrs. Cammie Henry, the doyenne of Melrose Plantation in the 19205 and 30s, surrounded herself with writers, artists and folklorists. Not only had the Henry family acquired the Hypolite Hertzog land - which he acquired from the Metoyers - but they had acquired some of the finest examples of Creole architecture on the river, Louis Metoyer's Yucca Plantation (its earliest known name). It

still remains the largest block of land alienated from the 18,000 acres the descendants of Marie Thérèze Coin-Coin acquired. The worst thing is the impression left by that. Namely, that the Creoles were landless, powerless, dispossessed people, living marginally on their pitifully small holdings. In Children of Strangers, Lyle Saxon lamented the tragedy of their assimilation into black culture. Children of Strangers made Melrose famous. He described the region and the people faithfully, but the isolated story of Fammie left the Creoles depicted as a marginal people, a dying culture.



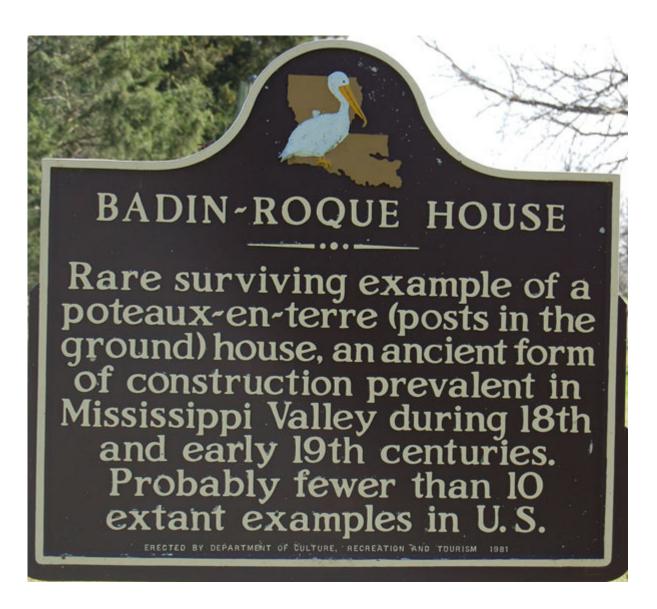
The impact of Melrose intensified with the sale of the property. It was one thing for the Creole community to know that, by one means or another, Mrs. Henry had acquired their heirlooms to furnish her houses, making Creole heritage her hobby. Some saw her interest as a compliment, but most saw it, at best, as preservation.

The 1970s brought preservation back to the river. The late Dr. Tom Wells purchased the Tauzin-Wells House in Natchitoches and began restoring it to its original 18th-century form. He began buying doors, hinges, and millwork

from Creole houses on Cane River. Innocuous as it might seem, it damaged the integrity of Creole structures and had a wider effect. The house of Madame Aubin Roque was abandoned and disintegrating. It was decided in Natchitoches to purchase it and move it to town. The mayor, Robert DeBlieux, hoping to preserve and develop the city's cultural tourism, saw the house as an example of architecture and history. While the effort saved most of the structure, the "restoration" altered the house in serious ways - so much it is hardly recognizable. Still it is preserved. There is little or no history of the house available at its present site, and Creole heritage, as presented in the city, deals primarily with white French culture. So, while the house has been "saved," the Creole community has lost a piece of its classic architecture.

Another such ambivalent situation centered on the removal of the kitchen from the Badin-Roque property. Dr. Lum Ellis, a sociologist, offered the property owner another storage house in return for the kitchen. No money exchanged hands. The small bousillage building moved to town, to the riverbank: near the Roque House. At that point, the Creoles began to realize their losses were compounding. Ellis, like Mayor DeBlieux, sought to develop cultural tourism as an entrepreneur and used the kitchen as office to schedule guided bus tours of the Cane River area. Knowing what was happening, the Creole community leaders met and decided to form the St. Augustine Historical Society, a group dedicated to the preservation of Creole

culture by and for Creoles. It has continued to meet for nearly 25 years. The St. Augustine Historical Society purchased the historic *Badin-Roque* House (sans kitchen) and began attempting to preserve it.





A grant from the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation paid for restoration and archaeology at the house. Again, the restoration severely altered the property, but intervention by federal and state officials saved the integrity of the house.

Creole elders felt they should not have had to have outsiders working on the house. One very articulate lady pointed out that the archaeology cost enough to build a new roof. Another elderly man stated he had enough cypress in his woods to re-shingle the house! In 1995, the house had to be re-roofed, with another grant from the State Office of Historic Preservation. This time a community carpenter

did the work. Efforts to move the kitchen back to the site were realized in 1996, when Dr. Lum Ellis gave the title to the building to the St. Augustine Historical Society.

In 1995, the Badin-Roque House was added to the tour of historic properties on Cane River, and in 1996, it will be joined by Patrick Jones's home. Gradually, the Creole community hopes to have its own tour. A prototype for that was developed in the summer of 1995 under a grant from the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training as part of Northwestern State University's Heritage Area Workshop. Terrel Delphin, Marie Roque, Lair LaCour, Janet Colson, and Mickey Moran were active participants. They picked a number of properties important to the history of Isle Brevelle: Marie Thérèze Coin-Coin's house, the Carroll Jones House, the site of the old hospital, Roque Brothers' Store, the site of Madame Aubin Roque's house, the Clara Jones and Herman Christophe houses, the Friendly Place or Wood's Hall, the Badin-Roque House, S1. Augustine Church and cemetery, the site of Augustin Metoyer's house, Patrick Jones's home (originally Lewis Jones's house), 24-Mile Ferry crossing, the Balthazar Log Cabin Balthazar stables and racetrack. On Highway 119 going north, they pointed out the site of the Green Derby and racetrack, Melrose Plantation house complex, the Alfred Llorens house, Kirkland's Friendly Escape (now razed), and Mrs. Bernadine Delphin's home.

All these properties reflect community history and that makes them very important for preservation.

Fortunately, only one house, Badin-Roque, is not occupied. History for the community instead of about the community is a new, but popular, concept for the Creoles.

Any number of older Creole houses have been lost on Isle Brevelle. The old hospital, Madame Aubin's house, the old Chelette house, the old Landry Dupree house, the old Chevalier house, the old Lewis Jones store, the old church hall, and others are remembered well but are gone. Fire seems to have gotten many older structures — a real problem in an area where wood is the dominant architectural fabric. Many of these structures were lost by the 1930s, fire being the most common explanation for their losses.

Some houses have been remodeled and "hide" older houses inside them. Carroll Balthazar points out that his bungalow covers their old home. His mother, Mrs. Cora Balthazar, preserved her "outside" kitchen behind the house. Shine Delphin's house has been re-roofed, so it looks "new." Still, it has an outside ladder instead of a stair, a colonial trait.

A serious folk-house-type study (1980s) by Dr. George A. Stokes of Northwest State University notes that fully 80% of the houses at Isle Brevelle are in French-Creole styles. French carpenter's marks are still closely visible on the Balthazar house.

All these Creole characteristics daily remind the people they are home and that there is still a Creole place. One lady recalled her father telling her as a child in California that there was no better place than Cane

River.

Somehow, with no real plan, the people on the island, along the river, up Bayou Derbonne, along Little River into the towns and cities have preserved their home. Dr. Rachal saved the Rachal house; Patrick and Lita Jones saved the Lewis Jones house; "Mrs.Bernadine Delphin saved the furnishings of Suzanne Metoyer; Carroll Balthazar saved his family home; his children have kept after him not to demolish the old log cabin. Thomas Delphin is working to save their old cabin, once a Melrose house. The Roque family has kept their old store. Time and tragedy erode the material culture, but the people have kept it going. At least a dozen traditional structures have survived from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, With the exception of the Badin-Roque house, there has been no outside involvement in any house maintenance or preservation. People have done most of the work themselves; their incentive comes from mainly within the community.1

1. WE KNOW WHO WE ARE: . . by H. F. Gregory and Joseph Moran pp.90-96